

Living Without A Net: Into The Frying Pan

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02/25/2011

What do you do when the job you have worked for, trained for and gone to school for suddenly evaporates? That's the dilemma facing many people who were once connected with the building industry. In Washington state, more than 63,000 construction-related jobs have disappeared in the last three years, about one-third of the total employment in that sector. Architects and engineers have also been hard hit. They've lost more than 12 percent of their ranks. Many of those people have had to transition to other jobs, or employ creative strategies to survive.

Today, KUOW is launching an occasional series called "Living Without a Net: Stories About People Who are Confronting Financial Uncertainty and Rebuilding Their Lives." Deborah Wang has the first story about a self-made man who is now re-making himself once again.

TRANSCRIPT

The guy you are about to meet has a story that might sound a bit familiar.

Guerrero: "Hi my name is Christian Guerrero."

In many ways, it's a version of the typical immigrant success story. Or at least it starts out that way.

Guerrero: "I was born and raised in Mexico City. It's a magical place, you know, where you actually play on the streets and everything."

Christian Guerrero says his neighborhood in Mexico City was pretty typical, meaning, it was poor. Guerrero's father was a butcher who had only a middle school education. He died when his son was young.

Guerrero came to Seattle at the age of 18. He started out working in a variety of unskilled jobs, not really sure what he wanted to do or what he was capable of. He landed first in an ice factory, working as a laborer, and then a friend found him a job polishing metal for an elevator company.

Guerrero: "And I worked for a couple years for that company and then after that, you know, seeing who was making more money than I was and why."

Guerrero realized if he wanted to get ahead in the world, he needed more training and more education. So he decided to go to school to become a welder.

Guerrero: "And I studied blueprint reading and different types of welding for about two years, and I got my certificates and everything. After that, you know, I actually was a welder. And I was making more money and I was like, oh, this is good."

But that all ended in 2001, during the brief recession that hit the construction industry hard. Guerrero was laid off from his job. He looked around for other work, then decided to use the occasion to go back to school again.

Job counselors suggested he sign up for a two year technical degree, like an engineering assistant. But Guerrero says he wanted more. He says he understood in some ways how buildings were built, but what he wanted to know was why they were built the way they were. So he embarked on a five year long journey to become an engineer.

Guerrero: "There wasn't much sleep during those five years, and especially for me, I think, I had to go the extra mile because English was my second language. But you know at the same time, I was very committed to it. I'm one of those type of people who, like, when I set my mind to something, I'm going to do it. I'm going to finish it, and I'm going to do it well."

Guerrero started out at community college, then transferred to Seattle University. In 2007, he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering, the first and so far only person in his family to graduate from college.

It was, by all accounts, a remarkable journey. In just a few years, Guerrero had gone from new immigrant, to ice packer, to skilled tradesman, to engineer. School, he says, was transformative. It completely changed how he saw his life.

Guerrero: "When I started school, I was like, I want to be an engineer, I want to design things, you know, I want to build things. And once I was done, I was like, oh my god, I can do so many things. I can do pretty much anything I want. The world has just opened a huge door for me to, like, go in any direction I wanted to go."

Guerrero immediately went to work for MacDonald Miller, a large engineering firm, installing heating and ventilation systems in new buildings. In 2007, the construction business was booming. Housing prices were at an all time high. Millions of square feet of condominiums and office space were being built, and all of Guerrero's hard work was paying off. But you can guess what happened next.

Sound: "We're in the midst of a serious financial crisis, and the federal government is responding with decisive action. We've experienced significant turmoil in our financial markets in the last few days including the collapse of Washington Mutual and Wachovia here and the failure of two major financial institutions in Europe."

And with the global financial crisis, the construction industry tanked. Guerrero held on to his job with MacDonald Miller until October of 2009. That's when his boss called him into his office. He told him it was nothing personal, but with the slowdown, he had to let him go.

And it's interesting, when you ask Guerrero about that time, what it was like, you'd think it would have been pretty devastating to work so hard to get that engineering degree and then find yourself back at square one. But Guerrero says he didn't see it that way.

Guerrero: "See, this is my point of reference. It cannot be any worse than when I was a kid. When I look back at where I am, the things I have now, the things I know, and I compare myself to, like, when I was a kid, the place where I grew up and I think of the people who are still there, you know, I have a lot to be thankful for. Right now is not the most comfortable situation I've been in, but definitely not the worst one, either."

So while Guerrero continues to look for another engineering job, waiting for the construction industry to rebound, he's moved on to plan B.

Man: "I'll have a burrito with carnitas."

Guerrero: "Carnitas today? Nice!"

And plan B has nothing to do with construction, or engineering, or building things. It's all about food.

Guerrero: "Charro beans are pinto beans with tomatoes, onion, bacon and ham."

Customer: "Perfect."

Guerrero: "Want those?"

Customer: "Yes. Sounds delicious."

Guerrero and his two brothers are now owners of Beloved Mexico. It's a shiny black food truck parked permanently on the corner of Fauntleroy Way and Southwest Alaska Street in West Seattle.

Guerrero: "\$11.25. Are you going to be back there?"

Customer: "I am man, just yell."

Guerrero: "Great. Thanks, man."

It's pretty typical Mexican fare - tacos, burritos, tortas - but with a healthy twist. They've got salmon and brown rice, and the mole sauce is homemade by their mom.

Guerrero: "Make it look pretty!"

Guerrero says his engineering background came in handy in designing the truck and fitting out the interior. He says he wanted it to be really nice. Not like an ordinary taco truck.

Guerrero: "Cause a lot of people are, you know, skeptical of eating out of a taco truck because it's rusty and dirty and they can only imagine what the food would be inside if that's the outside."

The brothers hatched the idea over lunch one day. They figured a taco business based out of a truck would be easy to get up and running, that it would take maybe a couple of months at the most.

Guerrero: "Oh boy, was I wrong! Yeah, it's totally the opposite."

Ordering the truck, getting multiple permits from the city, and setting up the site, took more than seven months. So instead of opening during the summer, when they expected a brisk business, they didn't start selling food until November, after the rain and the cold weather had set in.

Guerrero: "It's hard. I mean, it's a new business. A lot of people don't even know we exist yet, so. And on top of that, it's winter time, and to make things even better, the economy is not doing too good, so, it's a struggle."

And Guerrero and his brothers used up most of their savings to start the business. The truck alone cost about \$70,000. So now they're all working hard but not getting paid.

Guerrero: "I'm going to run out of money for me in, like, two months. Like, in two months I'm going to be completely at zero. So, at that point it's going to be, I don't know, I'm going to have to figure something out."

Guerrero says even if the business picks up, he knows it will never sustain all three of them. He's still looking for work as an engineer. His dream is to get a full-time job, and keep the business as a sideline. He hopes he can hang on until then.

Guerrero: "You know, sometimes I wake up at night thinking about, like, oh, my god, what am I going to do if this doesn't work? You know because you put so much effort and work into it and then you have to shut down. It's tough."

But in the meantime, he says he's keeping a good attitude, working really hard and giving 100 percent of himself. That's always worked for him in the past, and he says he hopes it works again now.

Guerrero: "Habanero?"

Customer: "No!"

I'm Deborah Wang, KUOW News.

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